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Claiming Democracy and Environmental Justice at the Margins: Land Rights and Urban Informality as Sites of Mobilization in Morocco

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ABSTRACT

Since 2011, Morocco has been experiencing major political upheavals. From the February 20th movement to the birth of the Hirak Al-Rif in 2017, numerous mobilizations broke out all over the country. Each of these mobilizations has its own specificities, both in terms of the forms of demands and the contexts in which they took place. This article aims to make a productive contribution to this global reflection by offering an innovative rereading of the dynamics of social and political transformation in North Africa, more specifically in Morocco. It does so by analyzing the increasing social conflicts between the State's efforts to privatize land and natural resources to revitalize the economy, and marginalized populations who resist their dispossession. It will examine how 2011's revolutionary movements opened new opportunities for marginalized communities to claim their rights. As a result of the destabilization of existing power structures, power relations between marginalized groups and the State have become increasingly radicalized: from the struggle for housing and access to public services—primarily water and electricity—in informal urban areas to the struggle for land rights and access to resources in rural areas. Throughout the article, it will be shown that these mobilizations have challenged, in their own way, the methods by which the Moroccan state appropriated and managed its territory.

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Since 2011, Morocco has been experiencing major political upheavals. It started with a protest movement for social justice and democracy, the February 20th Movement, in 2011 to the birth of the Hirak Al-Rif in 2017, a social upheaval that took place in the Rif region of Morocco in opposition to marginalization and social injustice. Since then, numerous mobilizations broke out all over the country. What is striking about these movements, and this contrasted with many experts' predictions, is that they did

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not emerge from within political institutions or conventional political organizations (i.e. political parties, unions, NGOs) (Gause 2011; Zemni 2013). In contrast, these institutions and organizations seem to be overtaken by popular demands and incapable of representing an alternative and sustainable political solution (Catusse 2013; Rivetti 2015). Moreover, the continuing eruption of social contestations in the rural and urban margins of North Africa forces us to reconsider previous academic analyses that understood the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ as predominantly an urban youth movement, principally from the middle-class background (Bayat 2021; Ayeb and Bush 2019). My previous research on Morocco has confirmed this critique (El Kahlaoui 2015). In Morocco, people coming from the impoverished rural and urban margins of society were, and still are, at the forefront of the democratization movement (Rachik 2014; Vairel 2014; Bogaert 2013b, Navez-Bouchanine and Berry-Chikhaoui 2003). Prior to 2011, numerous social struggles were already contesting the detrimental effects of mechanisms of dispossession accelerated by neoliberal reforms. The reclaiming of the right to land and resources—water, fishing, mining, and so on—lied at the heart of many mobilizations in the 2000s (Baron and Belarbi 2010; Allal and Bennafla 2011; Bogaert 2015) and constituted some of the driving forces of the social protests since 2011. It is therefore crucial that we revise and renew our analyses of the dynamics of democratization and include ‘the margins’ as important sites of political transformation and innovation (Bayat 2013; Tsing 1994; Wolf 2010; Bush and Martiniello 2017; Borrás and Franco 2013).

This article aims to make a productive contribution to this global reflection by offering an innovative rereading of the dynamics of social and political transformation in North Africa, more specifically in Morocco. It does so by analyzing the increasing social conflicts between the State’s efforts to privatize land and natural resources to revitalize the economy and marginalized populations who resist their dispossession. It will examine how 2011s revolutionary movements opened new opportunities for marginalized communities to claim their rights. As a result of the destabilization of existing power structures, power relations between marginalized groups and the State have become increasingly radicalized: from the struggle for housing and access to public services—primarily water and electricity—in informal urban areas to the struggle for land rights and access to resources in rural areas.

Through extensive data collection, this article maps struggles for the right to land, resources, and housing. To network my data collection, I used a mixed method research approach to conduct a multisite, longitudinal ethnography (Punch 2012). My methodology inscribed itself in the tradition of postcolonial studies (Chaturvedi 2012) and paid particular attention to the contextualization of the social experiences of my respondents. I adopted the method of critical ethnography (Burawoy 1991; Hopper 2002) to build detailed knowledge on why and how people think and act the way they do. I was aware of the risk of essentializing the experiences of the margins, (un)consciously categorizing them as the ‘other’ (Imas, Wilson, and Weston 2012). Through a triangulation (simultaneous use of multiple methods) of observation, participation and cross verification over a longer period, I tried to overcome the weakness of intrinsic bias related to single-method and single-observer methods and avoid writing only about marginalized subjects but also learn from them, see with them

and write with them (Shah 2019; Pal 2016). The first two ethnographic studies presented in this paper—one about an informal housing neighborhood under construction (2012-2013) and one about resistance of the Guich Oudaya tribe, expelled from their land in Rabat (2014-2016)—are part of the research I completed for my PhD (El Kahlaoui 2018). Aside from my doctoral research, I conducted a more global research project from 2014 to 2019 on land struggles and mobilization against dispossession in Morocco. As a militant researcher, I have been monitoring and mapping social movements within Moroccan marginalized communities, as well as building networks between these movements. During this period, I conducted several formal and informal interviews with local activists and attended meetings and events organized by various communities, nongovernmental organizations, and activist networks. For the case on Imider, I conducted a longitudinal study (2014-2019) that involved several visits to the camp, participation in a variety of activities with the movement, and interviewing activists from the movement (El Kahlaoui and Bogaert 2019). By conducting militant research, I was able to build a strong bottom-up analysis based on an active engagement that will be discussed in this article.

Setting the Context: The Right to Land and Housing as a Key Issue in Post-2011 Mobilizations

The question of the resurgence of mobilizations of marginalized communities has been crucial for the past decade, Morocco has positioned itself as an African leader on the issue of development and ecological transition. This transition is taking shape through the implementation of a policy of large-scale development projects (Bogaert 2018), such as the Cities Without Slums (VSB) program (Bogaert 2013). Nevertheless, despite the political ambition of these projects, Morocco still suffers from substantial disparities in wealth and inequalities in development between territories (see Oxfam 2019, Global Gender map), despite Morocco's efforts in the past. The implementation of the strategy of large-scale projects, if it has contributed to an official reduction in the poverty rate (15.3% in 2001 to 1.7% in 2020),¹ has generated the creation of development niches that do not benefit local development and have even accentuated territorial imbalances at the national level. For example, the solar energy project 'Noor' has generated many additional resource conflicts related to water access between national authorities and local communities (Cantoni and Rignall 2019). Thus, if these large-scale development projects do not allow for a nationwide development strategy equalizing marginalized territories to the metropolitan area, they also create conflicts between local communities and the state (Rignall 2021). Since 2016, the proliferation of several social movements, such as the Hirak Al-Rif Rif, Jerada, Zagora (Rhani, Nabalssi, and Benalioua 2020; Goeury 2019; Bennani-Chraïbi 2019), or even, very recently, Figuig (2024), which demands more social justice and a right to access resources, has come to put the state's development policy in crisis. Water stress, the overexploitation of mining and fishing resources, and the tension over land

¹These data were published by the Haut Commissariat au Plan, available online here: https://www.hcp.ma/Taux-de-pauvrete-absolue_a3151.html.

due in part to the accelerated urbanization of Morocco have led to an upsurge in social mobilization pitting the state against marginalized populations.

Marginalized communities' resistance to dispossession must be seen within the context of long-term historical development. Indeed, until today, the introduction of private property during the colonial era, the privatization of common lands leading to the disintegration of tribal structures as a form of government, the efforts to promote modern urbanization and the continuation of all these processes by the postcolonial state have generated resistance that continues to impact the ongoing reformation of the postcolonial state. During colonial times, the colonial state established a monopoly over the definition of property rights to undermine tribal property management practices. However, despite the country's independence, the legal framework governing property remained unchanged. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the 'melkisation' movement, i.e. land privatization, has shaped colonial state building and the destruction of the 'commons.' In the years following independence, this logic was perpetuated and even accelerated, justified by the need to modernize economic structures in the country. In the 1970s, the reallocation of colonial lands contributed to the consolidation of King Hassan II's power by garnering the support of the rural political elite and notables (Leveau 1985). In Morocco, dispossession is a central element shaping the context in which political actions develop and emerge.

This mechanism was slightly altered by neoliberalism by adding private investors as new 'partners' and blurring the distinction between the financial sector's and state's respective roles. Due to this transformation, a new type of justification has developed under so-called 'democracy' and 'good governance.' Consequently, many researchers have focused their research on social movements that demand democratic reforms (freedom of speech) and resist neoliberal policies (privatization of the public sector). In these studies, they focused their attention on civil society, which consists mainly of educated urban middle-class individuals. However, far less attention has been given to struggles occurring at margins, which have often been regarded as nonpolitical in nature since their demands have not been expressed in critical terms of neoliberalism.

To fill this gap, this article tries to understand the modalities of government, spatial reordering and contestations in post-2011 Morocco by analyzing the close interactions between the State and those struggles organized at the margins. This idea, which has been developed in the political anthropology literature (Corrigan 1980; Sparrow, Novak, and Sawyer 2015), is based on the premise that it is necessary to understand politics as a transformative process constantly in motion, primarily driven by contestation and even open struggle, rather than as a set of practices and activities limited to conventional institutional organizations (Balandier 2013 [1967], Holston 2009; Ogien 2012). Moreover, this article places the politics in/of the margins at the center of this process and thus goes beyond the influential conceptual distinction made by Scott (1990, 2013) between politics (the formal, the public) and 'infrapolitics' of subordinate social groups (the everyday, the hidden, the unnoticed—and thus not quite political enough to be perceived as such). Following Scott, this article argued that it would be too simplistic to assume that the condition of marginality reduces individuals to political passivity or indifference (Pal 2016). In contrast, marginalized populations are often the first to take advantage of opportunities for political destabilization to (quietly) encroach upon public

space and appropriate it according to their interests (Bayat 2009). The process of state formation is often transformed through often unnoticed/hidden negotiations, practices and confrontations between the informal world in which the most marginalized populations live and the world of state institutions. This article aimed to grasp exactly this transformative space and subtle balance within a broader process of political transition (Dahou and Moussa 2015).

Mechanisms of dispossession alongside processes of privatizing ‘the commons’ (Federici 2018; Dardot and Laval 2015; Linebaugh 2014), which can be traced back to the colonial era (McAuslan 2015; Bhandar 2018), were foundational for the formation of the modern states in North Africa and continue to (re)form those states today (Bessaoud 2016; Amin 1970). This article aims to map the proliferation of social contestation in the margins of Moroccan society since 2011 as a form of resistance to this long-running political process. My work understands this phenomenon of dispossession as a part of a global phenomenon (Mahdi 2018) and will explain the existing systemic connections between processes linked to the monopolization of agricultural lands in rural areas and procedures of eviction and expropriation in urban areas and the proliferation of mobilizations in the margins (Kelly 1998; Angotti 2013; Van Noorloos, Klaufus, and Steel 2018; El Kahlaoui 2024). Several accounts have focused on existing conflicts of legitimacy between modern (postcolonial) state legislation and the customary laws of local communities related, for example, to the management of collective or common land (*terres collectives*) (Freire 2003; Mufune 2010; Cabalion 2014; Rachik 2016; Huizenga 2018). These accounts highlighted how the modernization of legislation has often been used as a tool to legitimize the appropriation of wealth of these communities (Kapoor 2017). Nevertheless, by focusing mainly on rural areas (Sauer 2012), these analyses neglected the emergence of new spaces of informal law within urban margins. During the colonial period, the tribal organizational system was destructured and delegitimized (Alboukacem & co 2018); today, more than fifty years after the process of decolonization and the formation of the postcolonial state, struggles for property are no longer confined to tribal areas (Dahou 2018; Maeckelbergh 2012; Schijman 2013). Indeed, rural exodus and intensive urban growth have created new areas of political uncertainty in which an intense struggle for property rights is taking place, and it is all taking place in the areas designated spaces of urban informality (McMichael 2016; Lombard and Rakodi 2016). To understand this phenomenon, I coined the concept *uncertain properties*. The concept refers to property not secured by the legal apparatus of the state, such as informal settlements, indigenous lands, and refugee camps. This article will examine the inherent conflict that marginalized communities face in defending their contested *uncertain properties*, which contradicts the strictly legal definition of what is considered legitimate forms of property ownership (Cavanagh 2013). By exposing the existing systemic link between these new spaces of informal law within the margin and the historical process of delegitimizing rural customary law, this article will investigate how, in the Global South, informality/uncertainty is political, not just a question of a failure to ‘catch up’ or merely pathological (hence a-political). Rather, I conceptualized informality/uncertainty as one of the modalities through which capitalist modernity has been reconfigured in postcolonial countries (Roy and Sayyad 2004). To

analyze and understand these reconfigurations, it is vital to focus on the forms of state opposition and resistance that organize themselves in informal spaces.

Reclaiming a Decent Life after 2011: Negotiating (Re)Housing and Resisting Forced Eviction at the Urban Margins

Urban informality in postcolonial societies always reflects the power relations between the street and institutional political power (Roy 2011). The political reconfigurations of 2011 not only affected the forms of political action of marginalized urban communities but also affected the state's response, as Douar Lota's resistance will illustrate (Bayat 2021). In 2011, the state took a more cautious and strategic approach to managing sociopolitical tensions. The Moroccan State engaged in a dual strategy to address marginalized communities: first, paralegal arrangements were used to reorganize the legal structure of property rights and urban planning law, while simultaneous repression and marginalization were used to maintain these communities in a vulnerable and uncertain position. There is no doubt that informality, as in Egypt, has been used during the 'Arab Spring' to calm down the first phase of uprisings (Elsayed and Wahba 2019), and very quickly has also been used to facilitate land grabbing. Informality is indeed always used as a tool of governance by which the poorest people are 'offered' certain circumstantial privileges without being guaranteed their rights (Chatterjee 2009). Within this paralegal system, marginalized communities are doomed to live in uncertainty, owning only 'uncertain properties.' As a result of maintaining the uncertainty of life, in 2013 the Moroccan State quickly resumed forced eviction in informal areas or tribal lands. However, this historical process does not imply the end of resistances. The long-term ethnographic study I conducted (2014-2017) on the evicted inhabitants of Douar Ouled Dim will show how marginalized communities are able to leverage the opportunities presented by the political reconfigurations of 2011 to resist forced eviction and claim their right to rehousing.

El Bni Tatlak: Rumor and Mobilizations in Informal Neighborhood

Early in 2012, a rumor began to circulate. The rumor proclaimed that '*el bni tatlak*,' which means that all construction had become freely unrestricted. Launched the day after the victory of the Islamist party, Justice and Development (PJD), in the legislative elections of November 25, 2011, the rumor alleged that authorization was no longer needed to build or even subdivide pieces of land. Over the next few months, Morocco witnessed such an immense proliferation of '*bni el 'achwai*' (self-construction) that entire neighborhoods were built without respect for urban planning on land considered unbuildable on the city outskirts. The rumor, '*el bni tatlak*,' traveled with palpable effectiveness throughout Morocco. In the Southern region, especially in the Greater Agadir region, it is estimated that more than 5,000 housing units were self-built during 2012. At first, this phenomenon was tolerated by the local authorities, as it used to be before each election (Zaki 2008), but after the latter attempted to intervene to stop the construction, violent conflicts escalated between the residents and the local authorities. A day after clashes that opposed them against

the police, these neighborhoods were constructed forcefully, as evidenced by the name of a neighborhood outside of Agadir named ‘Derb bzzez’ (meaning: ‘built forcefully’). A taxi driver I met in April 2012 supported this view, stating that the city’s periphery was growing at a vertiginous speed, exclaiming that ‘a new Agadir is being built.’ For him, and everyone else I spoke to, there was no denying that, at that moment in Morocco, anyone who wanted could defy urban planning standards and build a house.

El bni tatlak spread across the country like wildfire, eventually reaching the small town of Bir Jdid and, in particular, Douar Lota. Perched and semi-hidden on higher ground, Douar Lota absorbs the city’s periphery and pours out onto the other side of the hill, which leads to the highway connecting Bir Jdid to two major cities: Casablanca, located 50 kilometers to the north, and El Jadida, located 50 kilometers to the south. Administratively attached to the rural commune of Laghdira, Douar Lota is one of the poorest and most marginalized Douars² in the commune. Neither formal district nor village, the dwellings of Douar Lota, draw a porous border between the urban commune of Bir Jdid and its neighboring countryside. This area was originally the site of an unfinished urban project that consisted of 100 unauthorized buildings and has hardly expanded since the end of the 1990s. However, at the end of 2011, the rumor spread the word that the King himself authorized self-construction. Over the span of nine months, Douar Lota grew from approximately 100 to approximately 1000 houses (El Kahlaoui 2022).

The ‘*el bni jdid*,’ or new buildings, differed from those before them in approach and structure. Strong with conviction and equipped with the rumor, people constructed these buildings in broad daylight as if they were legally permissible. The practice of giving corruption is no longer necessary, in contrast to what was the ‘custom’ prior to 2011 (Zaki 2010). The more ‘*el bni jdid*’ spread, the more the phenomenon concretized. The effect of the rumor became literally materialized in concrete walls. As the old houses were cemented together, bricks piled up around new constructions. Renovations removed the tin roofs, adorned buildings with iron rods, put window frames into the walls and placed wooden doors in the entrances. Concrete, a sign of modernity and the progression toward a city par excellence, increasingly appeared. The construction moved quickly, and each new settlement attracted the next settlement, as the rumor circulated like the wind. Every day, more people excluded from the city and soon, it was widely known that on the banks of Bir Jdid, Douar Lota, there was room. The inhabitants made it known wherever they could, starting with their relatives and reaching out to those at work and friends over the phone, attracting people with the prospect that they could all better support each other by living in proximity. Those at the Douar Lota felt strong. Newcomers came from all over Morocco, people from the countryside arrived with city dreams in hopes of finding work, and city people came to seek countryside comfort. By and large, however, Douar Lota was set up by a network of family and friends. There are no urban administration benefits for the Douar Lota, which is located on the outskirts of the city. Douar Lota is administratively connected to the rural world, so it

²A Douar is a name given to a rural cluster of habitation in Morocco.

lacks any urban infrastructure. The situation, however, began to change after 2011; due to the arrival of a new population and the loss of control that the local authorities experienced over the course of 2012, the relationships between the various local authorities and the population were affected. Therefore, the idea of creating a 'neighborhood association' was born. Houses built in 2012 need to be electrified, drinking water connected to the district, waste containers installed, and cultural activities organized (school support and literacy classes).

During the afternoon of December 2012, Said, a new resident of the Douar, discussed with his neighbors the possibility of creating an association. Walking down the street with a determined step, he knocks on each door and shouts: 'We're forming an association to ask for water. Join us!' The neighbors are stunned but nod in agreement and joined. In less than fifteen minutes, all the residents of the three streets concerned had gathered. At this point, the new residents were not fully integrated into the neighborhood. Nevertheless, since many of them come from the city and have more education, a new resident in his 30s, a computer repairman, is elected to the board of directors. There is enthusiasm in men's voices. However, this enthusiasm did not last very long. As soon as the sheikh—a local authority—became aware that a meeting had been organized in the neighborhood, he intervened to inquire about the purpose of the gathering. As quickly as they had gathered, the inhabitants dispersed after a few altercations. In May 2013, a few new residents decided to relaunch the neighborhood association. Unlike last time, the old residents were not invited to the discussions, particularly since they were not concerned with the same issues. However, as is often the case in Morocco, the *Caïd*, the local representative of the Ministry of Interior, refused to grant the new board of directors the legal authorization to create the association.

Since 2013, the Moroccan security system has strengthened, making it more difficult for neighborhood associations to form, particularly in informal areas. The self-construction of new houses was prohibited in Douar Lota and all of Morocco. If the state regained control, it did so in a different manner than before 2011. The so-called 'democratic transition' in the 2000s was accompanied by improvements in the management of informal housing and the fight against indecent housing (Navez-Bouchanine 2003). Several programs to restructure informal neighborhoods and provide access to electricity and water were implemented at that time (Iraki 2009). However, in 2013, all ongoing negotiations to improve access to basic services in informal settlements were suspended by local authorities. Bir Jdid's mayor has been instructed not to take any action to improve the living conditions of informal neighborhoods. Moreover, residents of informal neighborhoods built after 2011 will not have the right to be recognized as inhabitants of their cities or villages. For them, it is impossible to obtain any administrative documents. From now on, the school of Bir Jdid will no longer accept the children of Douar Lota. It is mandatory for all inhabitants of Douar Lota to attend the school of the Douar, which is a simple classroom with no access to water. This school was the very thing parents were fleeing from in the hope that their children would have a better future in the city.

Mobilizations against Privatization and Discrimination against Tribal Women: The Use of the 2011 Constitution as a Tool of Resistance

In 2013, as the power of the state stabilized, and a counterrevolution spread throughout the Arab region, the Moroccan State resumed its normal activities (De Smet and El Kahlaoui 2021), especially facilitating the acquisition of lands that will benefit private investors. Consequently, 2014 was characterized by the revival of major urban projects. Ironically, in 2011, Morocco was awarded for ‘delivering one of the world’s most successful and comprehensive slum reduction and improvement programmes’ by UN-Habitat.³ However, between 2011 and 2013, the state felt short of fulfilling its objectives. Most major projects, particularly those related to the Rabat-Casablanca axis, were suspended during this period. In addition, informal housing grew dramatically after 2012, reopening the wounds of urban informality that the state aimed to eradicate.

As a result, the State had to catch up in 2014. In Casablanca, for example, several historical slums have been forcibly evicted (Carrières Centrales, Douar Krinat, Schneider, etc.). Residents of Carrières Centrales demonstrated strong resistance during the forced eviction in June 2014, which was extensively covered by the media. The public was shocked by the display of police violence, particularly after an image depicted a resident threatening to burn himself to prevent police from arriving. Other images of one forcibly evicted woman from the Douar Krinat in December 2013 were also circulated on social media after slum eviction. Upon being thrown out onto the street, this woman built a makeshift camp where she and her five children lived. She wrote: ‘Who has no home, has no homeland, my ID number is BH00000.’ As major projects resumed in Rabat in 2014, eviction procedures were also implemented. The police forcibly destroyed the homes of residents of the Douar Ouled Dlim, which is located on common agricultural land owned by the Guich Oudaya tribe. Approximately 36 houses were destroyed, leaving residents without shelter.

Notably, the ‘Guich’ lands enjoy a special status. Sultan Moulay Abderrahmane awarded these lands to the inhabitants of the Douar Ouled Dlim, members of the Guich Oudaya tribe, in 1838 as a reward for their military service. However, during the colonial period, a specific law was enacted that dispossessed the tribes of their land ownership (Bouderbala 1996). Following independence, the Moroccan State did not alter this legislation, resulting in the Moroccan Interior Ministry owning all tribal lands, including ‘guich’ and collective lands. Today, tribal communities are merely usufructuaries and have no real influence on the privatization process.

In 2003, the Ministry of Interior decided to privatize the land of Douar Ouled Dlim to ‘fight indecent housing’ (El Kahlaoui 2017). The lands were sold for a symbolic dirham to the Société d’Aménagement Ryad (SAR), a branch of the Caisse de Dépôt et de Gestion (CDG). A major objective of the program is to construct new luxury housing on the land and to compensate and rehouse the inhabitants of the Douar Ouled Dlim in another area. However, following the demolitions of 2014, 126 families were forced to leave their homes without compensation, regardless of

³For more details on this UN funded project in Morocco, see here: <https://staging.unhabitat.org/list.asp?typeid=2&catid=219>

whether they considered themselves entitled to compensation. They all claim to be ‘children of guichiyas,’ i.e. those whose mothers belong to the Guich Oudaya tribe. All of them received a letter in 2006 notifying them of their compensation. Therefore, the inhabitant believed that the Memorandum of Understanding governing the privatization of the Guich lands did not discriminate against descendants of Guich mothers. However, in 2014, the local authorities adopted and implemented a ‘new rule’ based on the old military customs of the guich, which discriminated against women. Thanks to this new rule the local authorities refused to compensate and rehouse the remaining 126 families (El Kahlaoui 2023).

Historically, tribal women were excluded from property inheritance rights related to tribal lands. This resulted in a conflict between women members of tribal communities and the state for many years (Eddouada 2021; Boukhtil 2019). After a year of mobilization, the Ministry of Interior issued a note in 2010. As a result of this note, women are recognized as entitled to compensation when collective lands are privatized. However, this note has not been applied much, and on March 8, 2011, a new sit-in was held to celebrate Women’s Day. The promulgation of the new Constitution in July 2011 was another positive development, since Article 19 affirms equal rights for men and women. Thus, in the words of Yasmine Berriane and Fadma Aït Mouss, ‘the new Constitution has become since 2011 a powerful argument’ in favor of tribal women (Berriane and Mouss 2016, 112). In 2014, the ‘children of el guichiya’ from Douar Ouled Dlim who had not been compensated immediately utilized the new Constitution to support their cause. They argued that the Constitution guaranteed their right to receive compensation for the expropriation of their lands.

They say that a guichiya woman married to a guichi man has no right to

compensation. Even if she is a guichiya, she has no right to compensation. Where is the Constitution? Where are the rights of women, since the woman does not have the right to be compensated. (Woman from Douar Ouled Dlim, March 2014)

Forced eviction of the Douar Ouled Dlim is not an isolated incident in Morocco. Since 2004, Morocco has intensified the privatization of tribal lands, aiming to privatize 12 million hectares (Mahdi 2014). In a similar vein to Douar Ouled Dlim, the Douar Sbita located on the outskirts of Salé also resisted eviction from their collective lands in 2014. Through the use of the Dahir 1919, the law governing collective lands in Morocco, the Ministry of Interior sold these lands to Addoha, a powerful developer in 2007 (Sakhraji and Mellakh 2022). The ‘Plage des Nations’ project includes apartments, villas, and 18 holes of golf along the coast on 500 hectares. In the Douar Sbita, residents claim that they were not consulted during the sale agreement. As a result, women and single men were excluded from receiving compensation. Since 2014, the residents of the Douar Sbita have been gathering almost weekly (every Sunday) under the leadership of Saida, who leads their movement to claim their right to compensation.

Amazigh Rural Network to Resist Dispossession and Claim Land and Resource Rights

It appears that urban or peri-urban struggles are not so different from rural struggles. In this regard, the issues of land dispossession, the right to resources, and access to

efficient public services seem to transcend the urban/rural divide. As shown by Stefan Kipfer (2007), Frantz Fanon's writings offer novel perspectives for thinking about spatial questions in a postcolonial context (Fanon 2004 [1961]). Fanon argues for a deconstruction of the binary between urban and rural space established by colonialism. Following this line of thought, this article aims to understand the governmental logics that (re)structure postcolonial space by connecting social struggles that erupt in the urban space with those in the rural space (Zemni 2017; Rignall and Atia 2017). Establishing this link is vital to understanding Morocco's current political transformation processes. Indeed, by introducing the concept of the modern city (*la ville nouvelle*), French colonial powers dissolved in profound ways traditional logics of governing and structuring societal space (Berque 1962), notably by producing a dual spatial structure (Abu-Lughod 1980) dividing the territory between a modern urban space (*ville nouvelle*) and rural and/or informal space (rural hinterland and shantytown). In doing so, the colonial system and its postcolonial modernist successor laid the foundations of a politically constructed division between a modern economy (predominantly urban) and an informal economy (predominantly rural). It facilitated, with the help of specific and carefully designed state legislation, the transfer of surplus value generated by the labor of local communities and the extraction of their resources (Benzakour 1978; Halvorsen 1978; Davis 2006). As a result, it is crucial to examine more globally, from an urban to rural perspective, how movements at the margins are structured to better understand the dynamics of Moroccan social and political change. As shown here, the rural margins of Morocco appear to be clustered around well-structured militant networks, contrary to what might be expected. Specifically, the mobilization of Amazigh identity creates a common base of demand that serves as a catalyst to consolidate micro mobilizations scattered throughout the region (Collado 2013; Ennaji 2014).

Imider: An Emblematic Struggle for the Right to Resources

In August 2011, Imider, a small rural commune in the southeastern Moroccan province of Tinghir, established a permanent camp on 'Mount Albban' to shut off water supplies to the mining company Managem, owned by Al Mada, the Royal holding company (Benidir 2023). The Imider mine deposit is widely regarded as Africa's richest mine. It produces primarily silver and, according to information provided by Managem, has a production capacity of 300 tons per year.⁴ Prior to 1996, Managem was a public enterprise, and it was not until 1998 that its privatization was completed in favor of the Royal holding company (SNI). The Imider's 'On the way 96' movement (MOV96) campaigns against Managem and seeks recognition of the economic and social rights of the Ait Atta tribe, who has been robbed by the company. This was the first social movement 'post-20 February 2011' to be subject to a vigorous repressive campaign: thirty of its members were imprisoned, receiving sentences ranging from two to four years. The last three prisoners were released in December 2017.

⁴See the Managem Group website: <https://www.managemgroup.com/en/imiter-mine>.

After occupying Mount Albban for eight years, the MOV96 dismantled the camp on September 17, 2019.

MOV96 was inspired by the first permanent sit-in (45 days) of the village communities of Imider that occurred in 1996, when mining exploitation was installed. When police intervened to disperse the crowd, one of its inhabitants, Lahcen Ourahmane, was killed. In 2011, the inhabitant of Imider circulated a petition calling for a 'right to employment' in which Managem would not limit summer employment opportunities for Imider's students. In August 2011, MOV96 emerged, and its inhabitants decided to 'radicalize' it (Moujane 2018). Activists of the movement set up a permanent camp on Mount Albban, launching the emblematic slogan 'Aman Iman,' which means 'water is life,' to cut off the mine's water supply. MOV96 demands are broad and seek to ensure that mining wealth is used for local development and environmental protection. Activists are concerned about the pollution of the water table caused by the discharge of toxic waste from the mine, as well as the monopolization of water resources for the benefit of the mine. The movement raised a variety of claims to remedy the socio-environmental damage caused by mining. For example, communities should be provided with adequate public services (schools, health centers). By promoting income-generating activities and training for its residents, as well as providing scholarships to students, Managem must also participate in the employment sector.

MOV96 has demonstrated remarkable creativity in mobilizing a variety of action repertoires to make the movement visible. The activists auto-organize life in the camp every day. They not only provide water and food but also keep watch over the camp at night. Imider's villagers meet every Sunday on Mount Albban. Villagers and militants meet weekly at *Agraw*, translated as assembly (Salime 2022). In this assembly, which is physically formed by a circle gathering women, men, and children, each inhabitant can express himself about the future of the mobilization, and militants can present various future actions. A consensus decision-making process results from the joint deliberation of movement activists and villagers. Activists believe that the horizontality of power and the deliberative form of *Agraw* are essential for the longevity of the movement, which is legitimated by the people (Bogaert and Kahlaoui 2024).

The occupation of Mount Albban for the past eight years has led to the creation of a 'counterspace.' Throughout Albban, many protest activities have been organized that maintain connections between the movement and the inhabitants of Imider with other forms of mobilization on a national and even international scale. An example is the organization of a film festival in November 2016 parallel to COP 22, which was organized in Marrakech and brought activists from Algeria, Tunisia, Kenya and the Navajo Indigenous people. Art is undoubtedly crucial to the movement. It has produced a documentary, *Amussu*, directed by Nadir Bouhmouch, that tells the story of the Imider people (Pierre-Bouthier 2020). The film was awarded the Grand Prize at the FIDADOC Documentary Festival in Agadir, Morocco, in April 2019. It has also been selected for several international film festivals. In addition to using art as a tool for struggle, MOV96 continues to maintain solidarity with other struggles occurring throughout the country. In January 2018, a solidarity caravan was organized in collaboration with the committee of support for political prisoners of the Hirak Al-Rif,

Casablanca to commemorate the release of the last detainees of the movement. In celebration of the release of Imider's detainees, the caravan brought together political figures, activists, and families of political prisoners from the Hirak Al-Rif. A press conference was held on Mount Albban following the caravan denouncing the criminalization of social movements, especially those related to the environment.

On the Side of Circumstantial Struggles: The Example of Adarouch

On January 25, 2015, I encountered approximately 450 shepherds who had established a clandestine camp on the grounds of the Adarouch Ranch in the Middle Atlas, which belongs to Othman Benjelloun, one of Morocco's richest men. In addition to their livestock, more than 18,000 sheep grazes behind broken barbed wire among the hills behind tents that have been hastily constructed from plastic tarpaulins. Historically, a seminomadic tribe of Amazighs, known as the Adarouch, has resided in this pastoral land. Today, they claim to want the land back. Using an old truck carcass as an improvised sheepfold, a shepherd camper explained that the heavy snowfall of the season prevented their livestock from grazing on the heights. In front of his flock of sheep, another man explained that the ranch resides on land that was originally used as transhumant land for the winter. He, as well as others, breaks the law in good conscience. His confident attitude, as he planted his stick in the fresh grass, appears to indicate that this man, who has been aged by the cold, is not intending to leave these lands.

The conflict over the Adarouch land dates to 1967. As a result of King Hassan II's request, 10,400 hectares of villagers' land were nationalized to establish a cattle ranch in partnership with an American company, Royal Ranch Texas. The villagers of Adarouch were then relocated to Meknes, approximately 50 kilometers away. 'Our parents left their homes under military pressure in tears,' said a young man who was displaced to Boufekrane, a small town 18 kilometers north of Meknes. In the 1990s, during the wave of privatization, Ranch Adarouch was bought by Othman Benjelloun, the main shareholder and head of BMCE, one of the three most powerful banks in Morocco. Today, Adarouch Ranch has become the largest cattle breeding company in the country, with approximately 6,000 heads of cattle and 150 employees. 'The Ranch rents the land from the public domain,' says Hammou Ouhelli, general manager of the Ranch. Met at his office in Rabat, this former Secretary of State in charge of social action, likes to recall that he himself is a native of the region. He admitted to being worried about 'agitators' jeopardizing the only major investment in the region: 'The Ranch provides a living for a hundred families, some of whom are housed on the site.'

There is, however, some opposition to Ranch's activities among the residents of the area. Mohammed Ishou Oushabou, the president of the Achbar Association (Benjeddi 2017), described this project as a loss-making venture and denounced a land grab. However, the Adarouch Ranch project is not linked to a question of profitability but rather to creating a distinctive brand identity. According to Hammou Ouhelli, the purpose of the project is not to earn money, as it is unlikely that we will reach a financial balance. Morocco has demonstrated that it can produce and

slaughter meat according to European standards because of the numerous investments made in this project, thus enabling it to export meat-labeled halal to EU markets. Modernizing a market to the detriment of indigenous tribes is the main criticism made by Mohammed Mahdi, a professor at the University of Meknes (Bonte 2001). For this anthropologist, a specialist in seminomadic tribe lifestyles, the example of Adarouch is symptomatic of the problems associated with the need to modernize the economy. 'Many pastoral lands of the Amazigh tribes of the Middle Atlas have been privatized by the state in favor of large projects. By destroying the ecosystem of these seminomadic tribes who lived on their livestock, the state has deprived them of their economic autonomy.'

From January to March 2015, the Achbar Association in Adarouch attempted to create a national network to represent those left behind by the large modernization projects being implemented throughout the country. In March, the villagers of Adarouch descended from their mountain to demonstrate alongside the expelled Guich Oudaya tribe. For several hours, they blocked the Ministry of Interior entrance doors. At the end of winter, however, the Adarouch shepherds dismantled the camp after sporadic mobilization. In the following months, Mohammed Ishou Oushabou, the president of the Achbar Association, became seriously ill and died. However, tribes that have lost their land and/or resources are increasingly organizing networks between themselves, and this desire is becoming increasingly evident within Amazigh activist networks. Thus, these socio-ecological demands are becoming part of a new repertoire of actions that break away from the classical modes of organization that led to the emergence of the February 20 movement in 2011.

Creation of Activist Networks for the Right to Land and Natural Resources

Within this context, there is a particular characteristic that emerges within the Amazigh movement, which initially focused on cultural recognition (Silverstein 2009). A political shift has occurred in the Amazigh movement in recent years, with the movement now emphasizing its fight against the marginalization of Amazigh people. Activists are increasingly emphasizing the relationship between the dispossession of Amazigh tribes and the establishment of a 'postcolonial Arabized nation-state' through their movements. As a result of its constellation of associations, the Amazigh movement is unique in that it is scattered rather than organized around a single organization, such as a political party (Aït Mous 2011). There are, however, two important structures to note: the student movement MCA (Amazigh Cultural Movement) and the World Amazigh Congress (Cornwell and Atia 2012), which bring together various Amazigh activists and associations on an international level. Amazigh activists are therefore primarily trained in the MCA on university benches. Among the differences between the Amazigh movement and other movements is the claim that they are the inheritors of the former anti-colonial struggle movement '*Jaych Tahrir*' (the liberation army) (Bennouna 2021), as well as their distinct cultural identity. Therefore, the Amazigh movement has a theoretical connection to anticolonial struggles and land rights. Amazigh activists are taught that their ancestors fought the spoliation of the Amazigh tribes by the colonial power and then by the Makhzen after the independence (Aboulkacem & co, *ibid*). This

theoretical connection between the Amazigh movement and anti-colonial struggles serves as a powerful source of inspiration and motivation for Amazigh activists. It reinforces their determination to fight against the marginalization and dispossession of Amazigh tribes, viewing their struggle as a continuation of their ancestors' resistance against colonial powers and subsequent oppressive regimes. A powerful symbol is Abdelkarim El Khattabi, one of the figures of anticolonial resistance in Morocco, whose legacy has been remembered and serves as a reminder of the importance of land struggles. His symbol continues to inspire Amazigh people to fight for their rights and land (Mouna and El Oualidi 2023).

In this context, in July 2017, an international conference was organized in El Hajeb on the topic of 'The rights to land and natural resources in the country of Tamazgha (North Africa).' It was organized under the auspices of the United Nations. This was a result of Amina Amharech's long-term advocacy for the recognition of the economic and social rights of the Amazigh people. She recalls with utter ease how her struggle for land rights restored her connection to her Amazigh identity and, simultaneously, brought to light the despoiling foundations of the Moroccan nation (Amharech and Mahdi 2020).

The story of Amina Amhraech began with a family tale. A land expropriation procedure is being pursued against the collective lands of her tribe, which were originally from El Hajeb. After the shock of the death of her brother, who died of a heart attack during an altercation with the local authorities, she had to deal with the affairs of her family to try to take back their land. Becoming embroiled in a legal dispute, she realized that the mechanism extended beyond the scope of her family. Amharech, a representative of the Amazigh cultural sphere, has made it her life's mission to fight the recognition of economic and social rights for the Amazigh people. It is clear to her that this struggle cannot be conducted locally. It is necessary to rely on international law, particularly the United Nations recognition of indigenous rights, to force the State to recognize the 'customary' rights of the Amazigh tribes. For this reason, Amharech challenged herself to organize an international conference in El Hajeb regarding the recognition of the Amazigh people's right to land and resources. She is proud to say that this conference has brought together 200 participants, including Omar Moujane, a representative of the Imider movement, as well as a representative of the Adarouch movement. A delegation from the United Nations, the Working Group on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (WGIP), the African Commission for Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) and the African Union (AU) also attended the conference, along with tribal representatives, researchers such as Mohammed Mahdi, civil society representatives and local elected officials. After establishing the extent of despoilment experienced by the Amazigh tribes,⁵ the conference's report, in its first recommendation, asks the State:

To recognize constitutionally the inalienable rights of the Amazighs to their land, territory and natural resources, including the right to the natural resources of the soil and subsoil. A strong claim logically generated the demand for the abolition of 'colonial

⁵A series of testimonies were made by representatives of local communities exposing cases of spoliations: Imider (Tinghir), Ranch Adarouch (Azrou), Tadwart (Agadir), Ait Warayn (Taza), Eau de Ben Smim (Ifrane), Ait Segrouchen (Middle Atlas), Ihensalen (Ait Mellal), Ait Meguil (Ifrane).

laws (including the laws of 1916 to 1919) and Moroccan dahirs⁶ relating to the expropriation of land, territory and natural resources of the Amazigh.’

Thus, although the Amazigh movement does not comprise a single organization, it constitutes a strong network of solidarity between different rural and even urban communities that allows for the organization and gathering of different communities. In November 2018, a new social movement emerged, called Akkal, meaning land in Amazigh. The Akkal movement involves several different tribal representatives, as well as Amazigh NGOs. It seeks the repeal of Dahir 1919, which governs tribal lands (Boubrik 2022). As a result of this coordination, several demonstrations have taken place in the capital and other cities of the country to demonstrate a claim to land and to denounce the colonial management of the land heritage of the tribes by the Moroccan state (Bessadi 2019).

Conclusion

This article discusses a variety of protest movements organized by marginalized communities to resist dispossession and secure their property rights. Throughout this article, it has been pointed out that all these struggles threaten the government’s ability to govern. Several marginalized communities have challenged the State’s exclusive authority to define and determine property rights. Starting from an analysis of the demands and organizational logics of the studied struggles, this article aimed to examine to what extent the politics in/of the margins (who are also situated in the margins of politics) manage to build, even in an embryonic way, alternatives to Morocco’s legal framework for property rights or urban planning. The purpose of this study was to examine the political nature of informal struggles, illustrating how they went beyond their local and circumstantial nature and questioning the very foundations of the colonial continuity within which the postcolonial state was built. These struggles demonstrate the need to resolve the problems of societies previously governed by tribal organizations given the emergence of a central state that enacts laws governing communities’ way of life and land status.

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⁶Dahir is a decree issued by the King of Morocco.

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